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## Athens Urban Space Riots: From December 2008 Revolt to Mobilizations in the Era of Crisis\*

### Espai urbà i conflictes en Atenes: des de la revolta del desembre 2008 fins a les mobilitzacions en l'època de crisi

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#### Abstract

Contemporary struggles and revolts in Athens during the economic crisis sprang from existing social relations and sowed seeds that are still growing day by day. In this paper we roam the Athenian metropolis, attempting to illuminate those aspects that prepared the ground for contemporary urban conflict. Following Lefebvre's analysis, we consider space dialectically, as a projection of society on the ground. Through a tour of Athens's particular urban characteristics, we analyze and compare the territorial spread of the December 2008 revolt and the contemporary mobilizations against austerity measures. We argue that Athens experienced the December 2008 revolt and the subsequent crisis struggles in its own distinctive way, which has similarities to but also notable differences from other recent urban conflicts such as the US Occupy movement, the Spanish *indignados* movement, and the Arab Spring.

**Key words:** Athens; urban space; riot; economic crisis.

#### Resum

Les lluites contemporànies i les revoltes que van sorgir a Atenes durant l'època de crisi van brollar de les relacions socials existents, i van sembrar llavors que segueixen creixent dia després de dia. En aquest article, recorrem la metròpolis atenesa intentant tirar llum sobre els aspectes que van preparar l'escenari per a les lluites urbanes contemporànies. Seguint a Lefebvre, observem l'espai des de una perspectiva dialèctica, com una projecció de la societat sobre el terreny. A través d'un recorregut per les particulars característiques urbanes d'Atenes, analitzem i comparem l'extensió territorial de la revolta del desembre 2008 i les lluites més recents contra les mesures d'austeritat. Afirmem, a més, que Atenes va rebre la revolta del desembre 2008 i les següents lluites contra la crisi d'una manera peculiar, que té similituds i diferències notables amb les revoltes i les lluites recents com el moviment Occupy a E.U.A., els *indignats* a Espanya, o la Primavera Àrab.

**Paraules clau:** Atenes; espai urbà; conflicte; crisi.

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## Introduction

The revolt of December 2008 was not just a flare that lit suddenly in the streets. It sprang from existing structures and relations and sowed seeds that are still very much alive. As soon as the news of Alexandros Grigoropoulos' murder<sup>1</sup> broke out, a surprisingly well-coordinated crowd of people managed to bridge existing territorial and social distances to create fields and forms of resistance no one had previously dared to imagine. In a similar way, as soon as the political-social-economic crisis started to spread in Greece thousands of people rose up once again, in order to defend their lives. We argue that all these peoples comprised a hybrid rebel class, which is a mixture of politically conscious individuals, university and high-school students, migrants, unemployed, and precarious workers who threw their identities into the melting pot of the rioting streets. As the crisis deepens, the virus of contestation and resistance spreads to every part of the Athenian metropolis and deeply influences the socio-spatial characteristics of the city.

In this article we approach space as a derivative of human relations. Hence, we consider cities as places of social antagonism that function both as fields of resistance and as sites where everyday life is reclaimed. Consequently, we feel associated with Lefebvre's famous thesis: "the city is a projection of society on the ground [...], the city is the place of confrontations and of conflictive relations [...], the city is the site of desire [...] and site of revolutions" (1968: 109). Furthermore we draw particular inspiration from the concept of *trialectics of spatiality*, based on Lefebvrian conceptualization of space itself.<sup>2</sup> For Lefebvre (1974), space differs in *perceived* (spatial practice), *conceived* (representations of space) and *lived* (space of representation), which means that space has to be understood as a complexity produced by society and constantly changing in its *physical*, *mental*, and *social* dimension. As stated by Edward Soja (1996: 65):

Through his critical attack on the double illusion, Lefebvre opens the way to a trialectics of spatiality, always insisting that each mode of thinking about space, each "field of human spatiality" –the physical, the mental, the social- has to be seen as simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical. No one mode of spatial thinking is inherently privileged or intrinsically "better" than the others as long as each remains open to the re-combinations and simultaneities of the "real-and-imagined".

Hence space isn't an empty container that is filled with actions, images, relationships and ideologies, but it is a social product or a complex social construction based on social production of meanings which affects spatial practices and perceptions (Goonewardena *et al.* 2008). In the beginning of this article we analyse the socio-spatial composition of Athens and compare it to other metropolis. Then we approach the territorial expansion of December 2008 revolt and the

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<sup>1</sup> The 2008 Greek riots took place in the evening of 6 December 2008, when Alexandros Grigoropoulos, a 15-year-old student, was shot to death by special policeman Epameinondas Korkoneas in Tzavella Street, in Exarcheia district of central Athens. Grigoropoulos' murder resulted in large protests and demonstrations, which soon spread to several other cities in the country as well as outside Greece.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that *trialectics* is not actually a concept invented by Henri Lefebvre, who rather used to talk about *dialectics of triplicety* (1974), an idea further developed and applied to space by Edward Soja (1996) in terms of *trialectics of spatiality*.

mobilizations in the era of crisis. Afterwards we discuss and problematize the socio-spatial characteristics of the Athens urban space riots and compare them to urban revolts across the world.

### *Socio-spatial analysis of Athens*

#### *The spatial evolution of Athens*

Though modern Athens became the Capital of Greece in 1834, it became a major metropolis only after the II World War and in particular after the end of the Greek Civil War, that means after the fifties. Ever since, Athens is the main urban pole in the Greek urban network. The post-war authorities, in their attempt to achieve social peace and to control the population, pushed for two parallel processes: firstly, a violent urbanization and proletarianization of what was, by a vast majority, the left-wing rural population, and secondly, a certain amount of tolerance towards unlicensed building and construction, called “antiparochi”.<sup>3</sup> In the words of Mantouvalou & Mauridou “the illegal construction in Greece substituted -not to say that in essence- a state social-housing policy” (2005: 2).<sup>4</sup>

During the period of the 50s and the 60s more than 380.000 illegal arbitrary buildings were built in Athens, none of them followed urban planning schemes of any kind (Verelidis & Verelidis 2012). In its promotion of private ownership and development, antiparochi would in fact comprise a spatial and social extension of the Marshall Plan, which aimed at the capitalist development of the country. The Plan’s aim was the post-war elimination of communist visions —still popular at the time— by promoting a liberal ideology of economic development, strengthening small private property, and promoting specific new patterns of consumption.

Yet this strategy of unlicensed building led —from the mid-1950s onwards— to extensive proletarian neighbourhoods and slums. Combined with already existing refugee neighbourhoods and traditional working-class quarters, the new districts created sites with strong class consciousness. The districts’ spatial characteristics were: high population density; low-rise, small buildings; narrow streets; limited communal public space; mixed land use; etc. The state response to the emerging militant working class of the 1960s took the shape of the mandatory demolition of slums through the further promotion of antiparochi and the subsequent class transformation of some of the workers into *petit bourgeois*. Thus, from the mid-1960s and continuing through the 1970s, concrete apartment blocks began to dominate the cityscape of Athenian neighbourhoods.

<sup>3</sup> *Antiparochi* refers to a system for building apartment blocks, applied en masse for several decades in Greece following WWII. In words of Maloutas & Karadimitriou, “this system brought together in single-operation joint ventures a landowner and a (small) building contractor who divided the built property produced by the latter on the former’s parcel. Antiparochi was preferentially treated with tax deductions and profited from the general increase in construction coefficients in 1968, becoming the unique system for condominium building until the late 1970s” (2001: 704). Following Emmanuel (1995: 179-181), in Greece antiparochi has been operating like a *flats-for-lands*, *land granting*, or *exchange-in-land* system. It is worth to know that the word *antiparochi* is a unique Greek concept which is used only in Greece, and there is no satisfactory single word rendering its full meaning. The Hellenic Ministry for the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works describe the *antiparochi system* as “a uniquely Greek arrangement, whereby the owner of a building plot was compensated with apartments in lieu of payment for the land that he relinquished to the contractor who built an apartment block on it” (see: <http://www.minenv.gr/1/13/132/13201/e1320106.html>).

<sup>4</sup> Authors’ translation.

In the decade of 1980s, however, Athens began to suffocate as a capitalist mega-machine. Its chaotic gigantism was not accompanied by the construction of the necessary infrastructure. The city was not functioning effectively; it was short-circuiting. The Operation for the Reconfiguration of the Urban Plan (ORUP) and the 1985 Master Plan of Athens (Government Gazette 1985) constituted the authorities' attempt to rationalize city's development. Entire districts of buildings constructed without licenses were legalized and vast pieces of land were allocated to the towns surrounding Athens, laying the foundations for future suburbanization. In the case of inner Athens, the model of a polycentric city was applied.

The ORUP project involved an attempt to suppress the city's anarchist and far-left political spectrum by means of urban planning. The idea was to gentrify the very downtown district to where much of the city's radical political activity had been gravitating since the early 1980s: Exarcheia. The attempted modernization project largely failed, partly for bureaucratic reasons and partly because the clientelist form of the state and widespread petty ownership prevented large-scale investments. These factors, along with the social struggles taking place in the area during the early 1990s, were not conducive to the gentrification of Exarcheia. Simultaneously, the bourgeois strata started to flee to the northern and southern suburbs. This movement would be accelerated during the 1990s and 2000s, when more than 500,000 migrants arrived in Athens.

It was during the 1990s and the early 2000s when the so-called "powerful Greece" joined the European Union's Economic and Monetary Union (2001), was strongly involved in the ruthless exploitation of the Balkans (1990s–2000s) and hosted the 2004 Olympic Games. Gentrification and major infrastructure construction work became driving forces of the economy. Social movements' response came quickly, with the eruption of the 2006–2007 student movement (Kompreser Collective 2012)

Alongside this, the schoolteachers' movement in 2006 filled once again the capital's streets with people protesting against the neoliberal reconfiguration of education. The ultra-parliamentary left and particularly the anarchist and autonomous scene would simultaneously establish stable points of reference in the metropolitan domain, setting up gathering-places, squats and social centres. In addition, urban movements emerged against the environmental destruction caused by pre-Olympics building work. Last but not least, base unions —mainly workers in the most precarious labour sectors-, were formed. All these initiatives would play a key role in disseminating the December revolt into the wider social strata.

#### *Athens Today, socio-spatial composition and comparisons to other metropolis*

Athens today is the sixth biggest city in EU (after London, Paris, Madrid, Berlin, Barcelona) with approximately five millions inhabitants that is the half of Greece's entire population. In viewing the entire urban complex of Athens, one can clearly identify that the northern part of the city is formed by neighbourhoods of higher economic strata, while in the southern and western part are located middle and working-class neighbourhoods (Gortsos, *et al.* 2008; Leontidou 1990).

However, in the centre of the city there is a mixed class composition. The main characteristics of Athens' city centre are high population density, diffusion and mixed land use (commercial, housing, industry), lack of public open spaces, and high-rise blocks. As Lila Leontidou pointed out, "porosity, spontaneity, informal housing, small property ownership, but also the employment linkage, have

created a mixture of activities and the vertical differentiation of groups and classes rather than neighbourhood segregation” (2012: 300).

**Figure 1:** Athenian class composition (concentrations of higher economic strata are shaded darker, lower economic strata lighter).



[Source: Gortsos *et al.*, 2009]

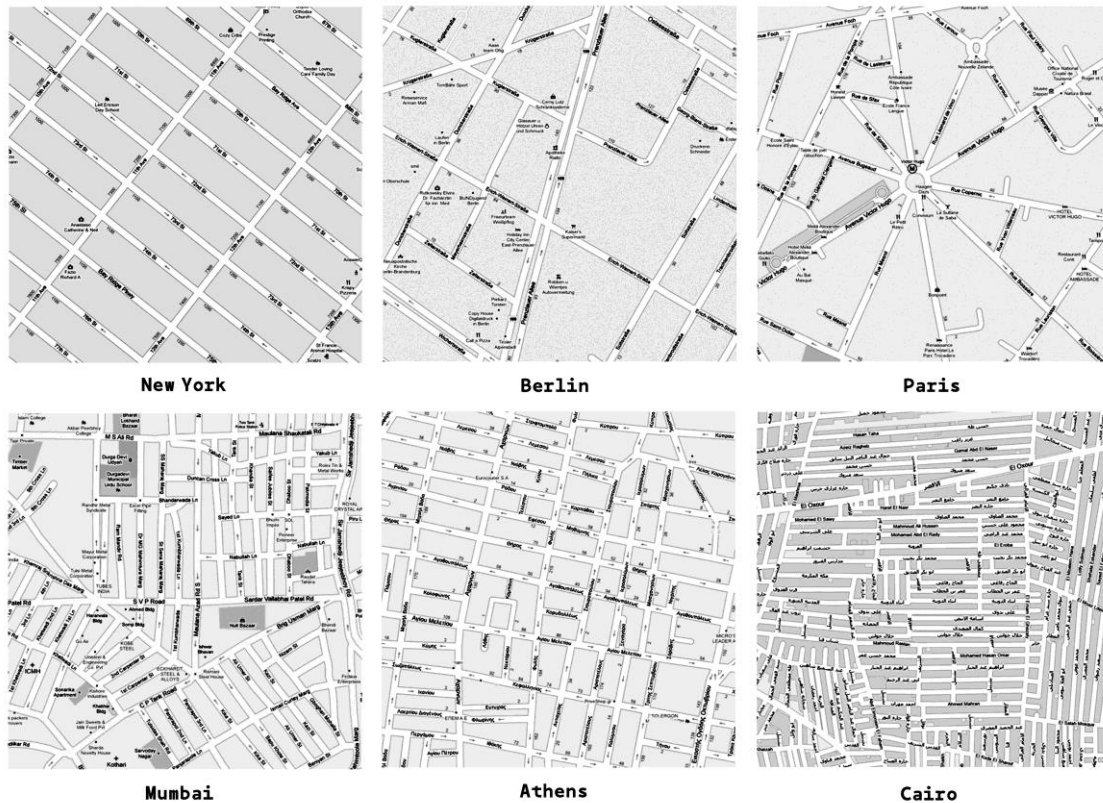
Furthermore, the centre of Athens has higher population density than all European capitals, including Istanbul. It is remarkable that only cities in the African and Asian continents, such as Cairo, Lagos and Mumbai, have higher population densities in their urban cores. Consequently, compared to its western counterparts, Athens has much smaller blocks and many more streets. Therefore, the public space, which has to be under surveillance and control, is much larger and denser. Hence, as we claimed elsewhere, “in terms of urban planning and zoning, Athens is a pure failure” (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou 2011: 37). It is also worth noting that the city of Athens is a *compact city* and only in the last fifteen years diffusing trends have been appearing. Only 10% of the Athens’ population lives in suburbs whereas the same rate in cities such as Paris, Los Angeles, Milan and Barcelona is more than 60%.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, urban planning in Athens is characterized by small distances (an average of 70m) between street intersections. It is worth noting that the frequency of road intersections has a particular significance when it comes to the crucial moments of demonstrations and clashes with the police. Factors such as visibility, ambushes, or the ability to communicate are directly related to the physical and geometrical characteristics of urban space. For example, streets in the famous unruly neighbourhood of Exarcheia intersect every 45m. At the same time, the average distances between street intersections in the centre of New York is 245m, in Berlin it is 270m, in London, Paris, Moscow, Barcelona, Beijing and Buenos Aires it is more than 100m, but in Cairo, Tunis, Damascus, Algiers and Baghdad it is less than 40m.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 2:** Sections of several city centres (the maps are of the same scale).



[Source: Developed by authors]

Another important socio-spatial characteristic of Athens is the fact that in the last two decades its historical city centre is being abandoned by its former inhabitants in favour of the suburbs. In the years that followed, about half a million new clandestine residents, immigrants from North Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe quickly settled there. Furthermore it is worth noting that in the last years there has been a continuous battle that involves gentrification processes and neo-Nazi pogroms against immigrants. All in all, the historical centre of Athens is a place where administrative, police, and judiciary authorities, commercial use and bourgeois neighbourhoods coexist with immigrant neighbourhoods and the alternative Exarcheia. Efforts to turn the centre into a controlled multiplex for tourism, entertainment, consumption, and innovative entrepreneurship are still ongoing, creating an even more mixed and complex situation. This mixed socio-spatial composition is crucial to each revolt.

### ***Territorial expansion of revolts***

#### ***The December 2008 revolt***

The December 2008 riots were instigated by the murder of a 15 year old boy from a policeman in the neighbourhood of Exarcheia, on a Saturday night.<sup>7</sup> The

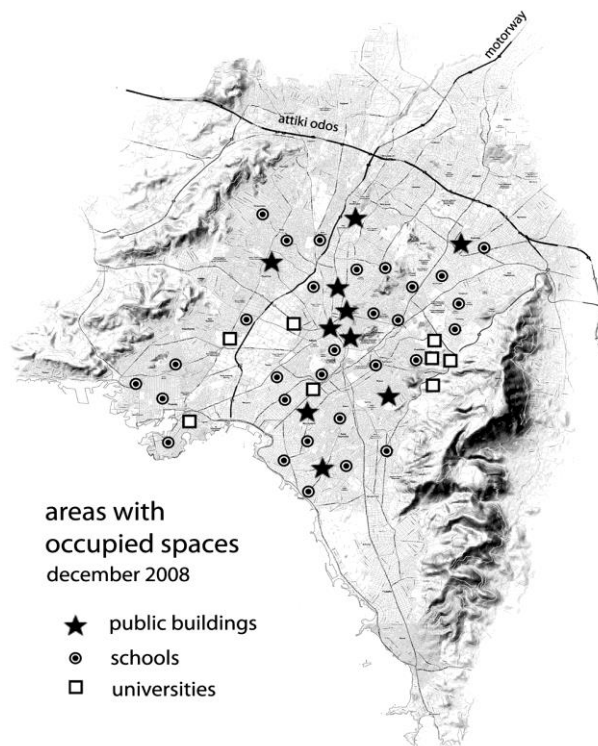
<sup>7</sup> While the unrest was “triggered by the shooting incident”, it is important to note that “conflictive urban reactions” were expressing deeper causes as well, especially a widespread feeling of frustration in the younger generation about specific economic problems of the country



time and the place of the murder could not have been more symbolic and provocative. Only a few hours after the murder, as the news spread instantly via mobile phones and internet people gathered at Exarcheia and at the Technical University, both reference points in case of emergency. What is known and always expected took place in Athens during the following hours; clashes all night long. However, the riots gradually expanded, beyond the common routes to other central areas of the metropolis, where young people spend their Saturday evenings. Similar actions took part in most Greek cities.

In the days that followed, the appearance of pupils and migrants changed rapidly the geography of the revolt. Every neighbourhood has a school and a police station, and those places will bring the revolt to a peak, thus filling the map with spots of resistance (Pechtelidis 2011; Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou 2011). In addition, numerous buildings were occupied in several neighbourhoods like local public buildings, university buildings and town halls that acted as nodes of a decentralized network and served as places of encounter and counter-information, and strongholds for clashes. We argue that despite the fact that perhaps the most spectacular actions took place in the continuously-occupied centre, the exodus to the periphery and the rest of the country comprised an even larger spectacle. As formulated by Michael Matsas, December 2008 was a “metropolitan revolt, as the social economic structure, class composition and power relations in the country had been profoundly transformed under the impact of capitalist globalization” (2010: 51).

**Figure 3:** Occupied spaces in Athens during December 2008 revolt.



[Source: Developed by authors]

- partly as a result of the global economic crisis-, a rising unemployment rate among the young generation and a perception of general inefficiency and corruption in Greek state institutions.

December 2008 sought endless novelty and surprise in the *lived, perceived* and *conceived* dimension of space (Lefebvre, 1974). The Athenian *physical space* was transformed from commercial flows of capital to occupations, barricades, smashing shop windows, the *social space* transformed to solidarity-sharing space and finally, in the *mental space*, the idea of uprising and revolt was constituted. Furthermore we have to mention that the three part dimensions of space (physical, social, mental) could not be policed by experts, whether they were on the side of the repression or the protesters. In this point we draw particular inspiration from Bauman (2007) term of “liquid life” and we consider that during the December revolt everyone stood in a “liquid space” and even experienced participants were taken by surprise by the revolvers’ inventiveness.

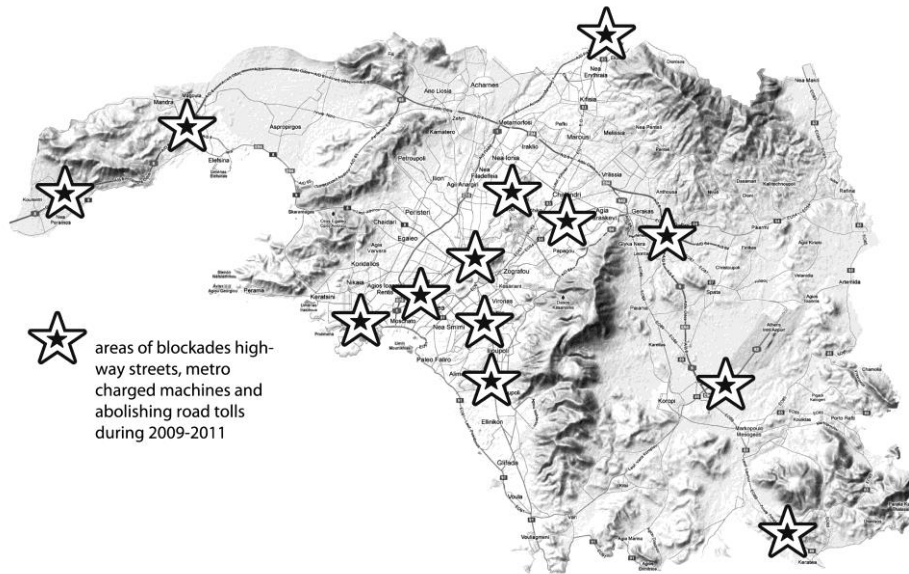
#### *Mobilizations in the era of crisis*

Subsequently, we pinpoint into two crucial spatial evidences that articulate the December heritage and the struggles against austerity measures in the era of crisis. The first is the creation of new decentralized movement structures in the periphery of the historical centre of Athens. During the period of 2009-2011, more than thirty new political social centres, squats and local neighbourhood assemblies established a social everyday movement in the metropolitan complex. The second is the strategic spatial practises of struggles and strikes. The austerity measures “molecularize”, deepen and stress the social and class antagonism in every part of the metropolis.

Consequently, the last years we have been witnessing a metropolitan spatial spread of the social movement tactics. Typical paradigms of such struggles in the metropolitan periphery were the taxi and truck drivers’ blockades in the airport and in the port of Piraeus against the opening of their profession, in summer of 2011, as well as the Dockers who blockaded the port and the logistics zone against the privatization. Along with them, the “don’t pay movement” fought against the privatization of road infrastructures and increases in tolls, and opened several times road tolls in national highway close to Athens during the years 2010 and 2011. Concomitantly, in the inner metropolitan complex, local neighbourhood assemblies blockaded hospitals cash desks against a new law that impose patients to pay for an entrance ticket to hospitals.

Furthermore, during 2010 and 2011, the same neighbourhood assemblies blockaded metro and buses charged machines across the whole Athenian metro and bus network against the increases of transport tickets. At the same time eleven general strikes were organized and joined hundreds of thousands protesters in the centre of Athens. All of them had as a focal point Syntagma-Parliament square and were characterized of severe police brutality. The strikes coincided with the arrival of IMF and the voting of austerity measures in the Greek parliament. Since the measures -against which people were fighting- concerned everyday life, people began to organize themselves in the neighbourhoods and in work places. As soon as the neighbourhood assemblies became more coherent, they began serving as starting points for gatherings and marches towards the city centre.



**Figure 4:** Metropolitan blockades in the era of crisis.

[Source: Developed by authors]

### *Indignados Movement*

The flare that lit in Tunis, Cairo and several Spanish squares during the spring of 2011 articulated with the Greek movement during the summer of 2011 in the two months occupation of Syntagma square in front of the Greek Parliament in the centre of Athens; at the same time Indignados occupations took place in central squares in more than fifty Greek cities, the same cities where the December 2008 revolt had spread. We argue that the Indignados movement in Athens indicates a dialectical crucial moment in the spatial expression of the struggles. Indeed, on the one hand, the occupation of the central square in Athens expressed the spatial and political capitalization of former decentralized tactics and, on the other hand, it constituted a hybrid space of commons where emancipatory subjectification and commoning processes took place.

Following autonomous Marxists like De Angelis & Stavridis (2010), Caffentzis (2010), or Federici (2010), commons don't exist *per se* but they are making in times of social struggles and they are constituted through the social process of commoning. From this point of view, we argue that in the occupation of Syntagma the community of commoners-indignados had assembled. This point of view is outlined by several urban scholars and geographers like Mayer (2013), Stavridis (2011), or Tsavdaroglou (2012). David Harvey also agrees with this approach and argues that "Syntagma Square in Athens, Tahrir Square in Cairo, and Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona were public spaces that became an urban commons as people assembled there to express their political views and make demands" (2012:73).

However, we argue that during the occupation of Syntagma square, we were witnessing of a "hybrid commoning" (Tsavdaroglou 2012: 24). The square, was divided into two arenas; the "upper" square in front of the parliament with patriotic-fascists slogans, Greek flags, national anthem, etc. and the "lower" square with the "democratic" general assembly of socialists, lefts and anarchists, whereas the majority of the people went from one to other. It is worth noting that both parts of

the square were indignant, self-organized and had as a central slogan “the burning of the parliament”.

Moreover, the common space of Syntagma shows the break of the former spatial contract. The permanent occupation of a square constituted a break to the former temporary demonstrations. Until June 2011 there were two main tactics in the repertoire of protestors: occupations of public buildings and demonstrations. Both of them express the spatial contract, i.e. the “democratic” right to interrupt the urban normality and protest for a limited time or in an isolated building. We claim that square occupations combine the two previous tactics and constitute a new spatial grammar in the syntax of struggles. In the words of Antonis Vradis: “If the December was an outburst, a prelude, then the occupation of Syntagma Square [...] was a first attempt to break the spatial contract or to cancel it definitively” (Vradis 2011:215).<sup>8</sup>

Though the protestors hadn’t changed the place of their protest, by prolonging the time of their permanence at the square, they created a crack in space. Syntagma, apart from an open space that hosted demos for several hours it also constituted an atypical asylum for the citizens. The perceived-conceived-lived space of the square was transformed from a luxurious central square to a place of resistance, a place of a community, and a place of inspiration.

### ***Space and struggles***

#### *The rebel class*

The involvement of various subjects is a characteristic both in the revolt of December 2008 and in the struggles of the crisis era. Although people repeatedly gathered under pre-formed identities, we claim that new identities rose during the conflicts and the everyday presence on the street in December 2008: those subjects in struggle, that meet and act together, creating a new collective “we”, as it is felicitously described by Stavridis (2011), ready to defend its everyday existence on the streets of the metropolis.

The December revolt materialized because it involved an ever-growing number of groups. In this way it spread all over the city, and for that reason it is of spatial interest. Equally, in the case of indignados movement, the middle class, the youth and the political activists composed a multitude of people that took shape within city space. Furthermore as soon as new people were involved, new spaces entered the topology of struggle and new places of conflict emerged. It is worth noting that during the Indignados movement, as soon as the metro workers decided to join the demonstrations, the metro station was transformed from a sterilized space to a shield, an asylum for the demonstrators. According to Hardt & Negri (2009: 249-250):

[...] the metropolis not only inscribes and reactivates the multitude's past -its subordinations, suffering, and struggles- but also poses the conditions, positive and negative, for its future [...]; the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class.

Hence we claim that the physical-mental-social space of the Athenian metropolis is transformed by the dynamics of the rebelled multitude. Yet, it is also

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<sup>8</sup> Self-translation.

clear that it is necessary for forces of repression to create a face for the enemy in order to target them more easily. And yet, the divisions that the voice of sovereignty would spit out through mass media, between the “good” and “bad,” “justly” and “unreasonably” protesting, between migrants, looters, hooligans, anarchists and “even young girls”, these divisions were not entirely untrue. The struggles are part of everyday life and as reflections of the society often fail in breaking the limits, such as those of gender or space sovereignty. Hence, very few migrant women were out in the streets, while very often migrants and indigenous acted in separate spaces. Nevertheless indignados movement strongly challenged these stereotypical roles. People tried to deal with fear, question their fixed identities, (re)share the roles and claim the presence of people during the fights in the square (Stavridis 2011).

Thompson (1966: 9) argues that the working class “[...] did not rise like the sun at an appointed time [...]; it was present as its own making”. Following this thesis, we consider that it is during the struggle that the rebel class is constituted, not as a class *per se*, not as essentialist reality, but as an ongoing procedure through which the class is making, mattering and (re)created. Moreover, inspired by Lefebvre (1974) analysis on the production of space, we consider that the rebel class has the ability to produce the “rebel space” not as a space *per se* but as an ongoing emancipatory space in the three dimensions of the physical-mental-social space.

### *Space as a symbol*

The physical-lived space of the revolt and struggle is primarily that of the street, the public space, the park, and the square. However, it is also the space of radio waves, television, internet, telephone and newspapers with smashed shop fronts on their covers hanging outside corner shops. As a result the image of the multitude would create the setting of a revolt even at the most distant point of the metropolis.

During the revolt, the streets functioned in various ways. They served as channels of communication that daily transferred the message of revolt to the metropolis, as parts of a network that connected the distant neighbourhoods of Athens, but also as links among buildings that brought the revolt into the private spaces of the city. Their unlimited capacity always leaves all chances open. Although they may constitute a continuous channel for the flow of commodities, they are easily transformed into a channel for conflict, since they are most of all, places of communication and encounter. It is one of the last intra-class places in town, where its residents coexist, although in a far from harmonious way.

Moreover city streets are one of the primary places of control. Indeed, in many –revolutionary– moments of the city’s history, the ruler of the street becomes the ruler of the city. The natural space in the city is still a protagonist in extreme cases. We argue that in states of emergency, that tend to become the rule in the modern metropolis, an event must be made known through the presence of people in the most public part of town. Barricades are set up, the flow of everyday life is interrupted; hence, the streets and the squares become the field of an open public battle that concerns everybody.

The dialectical character of space is shown clearly in the case of Syntagma. The square was drawn in the 19th century according to principles of “beautiful cities”, hence it is surrounded by boulevards which function as a fond for the parliament, an emblematic building of power. Until 2008 it only served as an

ephemeral place of protest. However, the burning of the Christmas tree in December 2008 and the indignados occupation succeeded in diverting its function.

As far as it concerns university and schools occupations as well as pre-existing structures, during the struggles they functioned more as organisational bases than as places that absorbed the crowd. Both in December revolt and in indignados movement, rebels had conquered the street, and they would not leave it for any occupation. On the other hand, the road as a place of conflict is fluid and hard to demarcate. Therefore, even during the conflicts, the rebels will often seek the “safety” of a building, whether as shelter, as a starting point, or as a place for discussion and counter-information.

It is also essential to notice that the more memories each space carries the more important it becomes for the people. Exarcheia neighbourhood, for example, has had a symbolic meaning for the movement as it is considered to be a liberated space; there, any clashes or the very presence of police have been treated like intrusion. Exarcheia neighbourhood has retained its character and its memories for years. Therefore it is crucial the way spaces gain their symbolization and recreate new memories. By creating memories like in Syntagma square people ultimately produce new spaces in the city. Accordingly, urban space operates as a symbol of power and authority, as a signal of overall dominance in political and everyday life. What takes place in Athens is a parallel struggle not only for territorial dominance in the physical-lived space but also for the control over the meanings that are produced by social relations in the perceived, conceived, mental and social space.

### *The rhythm of the movement*

Focusing on the struggles’ spatial diffusion, we pinpoint in the interrelation between concentrated occupations of squares and buildings, that offer a permanent place for discussing, exchanging ideas, and the street movement that fluids the city and transports the message of resistance.

During the December 2008 revolt actions took place with a direction from the already-conquered centre towards the outside. In this framework, Exarcheia neighbourhood acted more like a symbolic space. The news spread across streets and houses, through television, balconies and rooftops (where smoke from the city’s burning buildings was visible), and of course across people’s minds and consciences. All the above formed places hardly restricted geographically. This “exodus” from the centre was crucial for the revolt. The turmoil moved from Exarcheia to the metropolis of Athens and gradually to the whole country. At the same time it spread in more than thirty countries and in 150 cities where solidarity actions took place, from Japan to Argentina and from Cairo to Helsinki.

The spatial expansion of the 2008 revolt was transformed into a concrete “pause” in Syntagma square and became even stronger. In this point we draw particular inspiration of Kostas Douzinas’ term of “Stasis Syntagma” (2011), arguing that Indignados movement in Syntagma square constituted a spatial Stasis. Amongst the several meanings of the word *stasis*,<sup>9</sup> we particularly refer to the one

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<sup>9</sup> According to Kalimtzis (2000:18), the concept of *Stasis* goes back to the era of ancient Greeks and Romans and includes four main meanings: 1) *Stasis* as the *middle between of two motions* (see Heraclitus, Plato, or Aristotle); 2) *Stasis* as *revolt* (see Thucydides, Xenophon, or Herodotus); 3) *Stasis* as *disease* (“*nosos*” in Greek) and *crisis*, that is the crucial time of a disease in which the body either recovers or gets worse (e.g.: “*stasis*”; “*homeostasis*”; “*metastasis*”; see Hippocrates, Pythagoras, or Isocrates); and 4) *Stasis* as political, moral, rhetorical *stance* (see Aristotle, Aeschinus, or Hermagoras of Temnos).

used by Cicero in his *Topica* (44 BC): “the refutation of an accusation, in which there is a repelling of a charge, which is called in Greek *stasis*, is in Latin called *status*; on which there is founded, in the first place, such a defence as may effectually resist the attack” (Cicero 1753: 602).<sup>10</sup> In other words, *stasis* is the place at which the defence –set to meet the attack- first steps into the affray, so to speak for the purpose of fighting back, making a *retort*, or staging a *come-back*. In this regard, Otto Alvin L. Dieter defines a *point of stasis* as “the rest, pause, halt, or standing still, which inevitably occurs between opposite as well as between contrary ‘moves’, or motions” (1950: 369).

Indeed, Stasis Syntagma was the turning point between the former struggle tactics and an opening to new ones. It had an absolute rebel character. It reflects the disease-crisis of the social body and finally constituted the “topos” for political-moral-rhetorical stance. Syntagma constituted a Stasis of citizens who had reached a limit, a turning point, and were ready to freeze everyday life in order to rebirth it. Syntagma Stasis was a proceeding of struggles that brought together different aspects of resistance in a certain space. In fact, Stasis Syntagma consisted of several movements within it. Though it might seem like a concrete place, the square pushed several actions through the city. Since December 2008 revolt the fluid of people broke into numerous neighbourhood assemblies, which came together again during Syntagma Stasis. After 2011, the experience of Syntagma Stasis pushed forward for a new fruitful neighbourhood movement. Therefore what characterizes the era of crisis is a constant dialectical articulation of stasis and movement, through which an irrefutable socio-spatial wave is constituted.

### *After indignation*

Following the Indignados, several initiatives and movements all over Greece have emerged, focused to answer the crucial question of social reproduction. In Athens, more than fifty local decentralized neighbourhood assemblies were created, while in all over Greece more than one hundred started organizing communal gardens, collective kitchens, give-away bazaars, barter structures, self-studying and social tutoring. Furthermore, autonomous labour grassroots base unions, emerged as well as unemployed networks, immigrant networks, collectives and cooperatives as alternative forms of labour, producer self-organized networks, agro-collectives and social structures as social self-organized health centres, social kindergartens and social groceries.

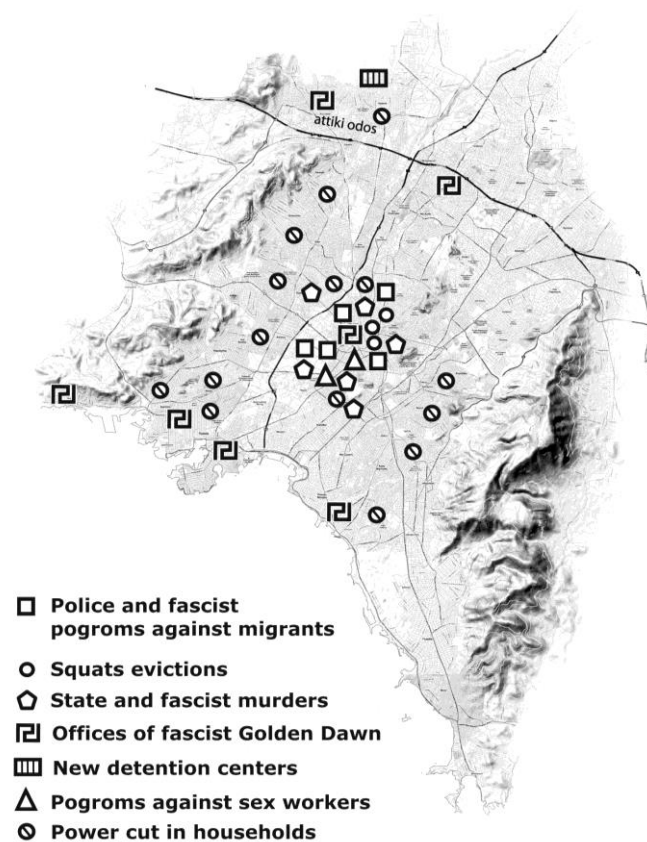
This period of experiments in (re)production, massive struggles and strikes against austerity measures that was characterized by the increasing role of the social movements was followed by the authorities’ response. This response was based in heavy police brutality and manipulation and appropriation of the radical rhetoric and it was materialized in almost every demonstration that followed, in the massive evictions of social centres and in the fascists’ pogroms against immigrants during the period of 2012-2013.

At the same time the Athenian municipal authority party goes under the name of “Right to the City”. The municipal party gained the 2010 elections adopting much of Lefebvre’s revolutionary rhetoric such as “the city as *oeuvre*”

<sup>10</sup> English translation used is from Yonge (1852). In 1753’s edition of Cicero’s work, the original version of the sentence appears in Latin as follows: “Refutatio autem accusationis, in qua est depulsio criminis, quoniam Graece stasis dicitur appelletur Latine status; in quo primum insistit quasi ad repugnandum congressa defensio” (*Topica*, vol. XXV, 93).

(Kaminis 2010) and since then is applying a political program based on a rather distorted interpretation of Lefebvrian “right to the city”. Under this political rhetoric there are imposed urban policies for the dispossession-eviction-criminalization of squatters, immigrants, sex workers. The previous tactics are part of the troika’s and Greek government’s structural adjustment programs and austerity measures which also include drastic cuts in salaries and pensions; new enclosures in environmental and in the so-called “public commons” commodification-privatization of public infrastructures, hospitals, universities, public land, public TV-Radio stations; criminalization of alternative media; new taxes in transportations, gas, petrol, water, energy prices and in home property. Consequently the entire Lefebvrian notion of space (perceived-conceived-lived space) is in the focal point of the political and social conflicts in the era of crisis.

**Figure 5:** Crisis and Counterinsurgency in Athens (2011-2013).



[Source: Developed by authors]

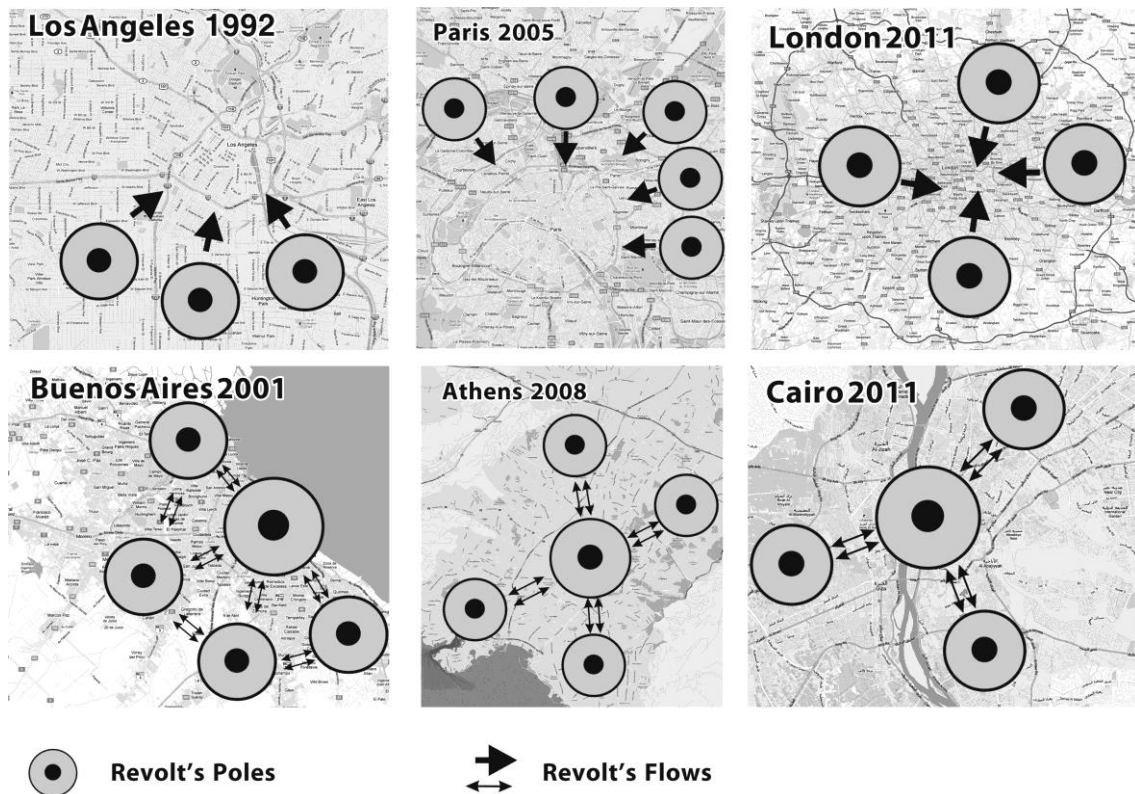
### *Comparing Athens revolt to urban revolts across the world*

The spatial characteristics of the revolts across the world varied from place to place. While the revolt of 2008 in Athens erupted in the city centre and spread to the periphery, in other cities such as Los Angeles (1992), Paris (2005) and London (2011) the rebels were excluded from the sterilized city centre. Zoning as a planning practice, not only separated everyday activities, but set unquestionable class divisions in the city life. The Indignados movement, from Tahrir to Madrid and from Athens to New York, contributed to an indisputable intention to reoccupy



the core of the city and question actively the political status quo. Depending on the urban net of each city, several kinds of struggle emerged that still have in common people's intention to defend their lives. The rebels of each geographical coordinates take advantage of the different possibilities that every urban environment offers. They adjust and create new meanings, images and relations. December 2008 revolt, struggles and Stasis Syntagma in Greece, Tahrir square in Cairo, Plaza Mayor in Madrid, London riots of 2011 are parts of a sequence; a wave. They create a multitude of rhythms, a synthesis of stasis and movement that form a wide net of people in resistance.

**Figure 6:** Nodes and flows of revolts in different cities.



[Source: Developed by authors]

## Conclusion

What was typical of the last year's urban conflicts in the Athenian metropolis was not a defensive stance against State violence but a constant offensive against all that resembles the presence of sovereign power. As it is formulated by Douzinas (2011), space and political disobedience expressed through spatial disobedience. Indeed, last years' movements proved that even the most emblematic and controllable space transformed to a place of struggle and resistance. Both open spaces and buildings can function as emancipating grounds and as limitation for people on the move.

Furthermore, there is an underground communication between people and space. The telecommunications along with school and neighbourhood networks have proved to be of great use, in combination with the political squats in the city



space. This wide net spreads as a vital mechanism from solidarity actions of December to the horizontal netting of the square movement during the era of crisis.

We claim that the last four years struggles and revolts broke the former spatial contract, brought to light the common space as rebel space and through the dialectic of stasis and movement gave birth to a plethora of spaces and practices in the perceived-conceived-lived space. Furthermore they left dynamic spatial legacies that are used and enriched in every new moment of resistance. Mainly, they left behind human relationships that enable people to develop more acute reflexes in case their mass presence in the streets is called for once again. However, counterinsurgency seeks to control them with heavy police brutality and to appropriate the radical rhetoric. We argue, consequently, that space is in the focal point of political and social conflicts; hence Athens among other cities vindicates its urban character through its small and big revolts. Evidently, by (re)producing the city space through struggles, the dominant geography is changing and rebel cities start to rise in several places of the planet.

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